

TESTIMONY OF JAMES P. MCGOVERN
FISCAL YEAR 2024 NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
MAY 12, 2023

Thank you, Chair Rogers and Ranking Member Smith, for giving me this opportunity to talk to you about one of my top priorities for the FY 2024 National Defense Authorization Act.

I respectfully ask that the Committee takes steps to continue the highly successful [VA Rideshare Program](#), which has helped thousands of homeless Veterans and Veterans in the HUD-VASH program access transportation to critically essential resources and services. This includes transportation required to appointments with service providers, conducting housing searches, and obtaining food and supplies, all of which are critical to support Veteran stability and health.

I believe it is essential that we continue the VA Rideshare Program. The pilot program originated at the [Boston VA Healthcare System](#), where Charles Franklin, the Innovation project manager for the [VA New England Center for Innovation Excellence](#), began the VA Rideshare Program as a pilot with 10 Veterans at Boston VA in 2018.

As the benefits of this program became more apparent, it expanded through authorization provided by Section 4201(a) of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (PL 116-315), which authorized the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to use appropriated funds for life-saving food, shelter, goods, and services for homeless Veterans or those participating in U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program during the Coronavirus pandemic public health emergencies.

VA Rideshare became a national program in August 2021, and since then it has served over 41,000 unique Veterans and completed over 400,000 rides. These miles translated to life-altering access to care and resources for so many. We should not take this resource away.

However, the authorization provided by Section 4201(a) of PL 116-315 has expired, with the end of the federal Public Health Emergency for COVID-19, declared under Section 319 of the Public Health Service Act.

I want to share a few anecdotes which highlight the effectiveness of the VA Rideshare program.

One of my constituents said: "I'm 55, I have Parkinson's, which makes everything hard, and I was homeless all last year. Luckily my VA housing team helped me find a great place to live. After moving in I had trouble getting my medication delivered to my new apartment, and a few times I ran out of my pills without refills. It was terrifying. My legs started to freeze up and my stutter got real bad. I was actually scared for my life. When this happened my case manager was

able to get me into a rideshare so a few minutes later I was at the VA pharmacy seeing my doc and getting my medication refilled. At the ER I would have sat around for 8 hours.”

Another constituent, who was formerly a homeless Veteran said, “I got eye surgery at a VA hospital an hour from my home. After that, I had a follow-up appointment every Friday for six weeks. My case manager used Rideshare to get me to those appointments which meant it only took 2 hours round trip. If I didn't have Rideshare I would have had to take public transportation and a VA shuttle which would have been 3 or more hours in each direction. Not sure I would have gone to those appointments without my case manager and Rideshare's help.”

One of the employees implementing this program said, “I'm a frontline HUD-VASH staff and this is happening while I'm thinking about vignettes to support the 4201 authority. A medically frail Veteran who was street homeless for three years is on the phone with the VA. That VA staff just messaged me on Microsoft Teams saying the Vet has a bladder infection and needs to see his doctor asap. The VA staff can schedule the Vet a doctor's appointment for tomorrow but the Vet is saying he can't come because he doesn't have transportation. Thanks to 4201, in particular the Rideshare program, I'm going to schedule a ride for this Vet that will pick him up at home tomorrow morning, bring him to his doctor's appointment, and be available to bring him home afterward. Without rideshare, this Vet's bladder infection would get worse and he would end up in the ER. This resource is literally saving lives.”

Another HUD-VASH worker said, “I carry a full caseload and manage a growing HUD VASH team. Rideshare and 4201 flexible 'ARPA' funds have transformed every aspect of our program. We've never had so much success housing Veterans, keeping them safely inside, and connecting homeless Veterans to care. Giving up these invaluable tools will hurt our Veterans and delay housing the most vulnerable among them. These programs exemplify how the VA can revolutionize delivering care to our Veterans!”

So many of my constituents work every day to support Veterans, and everyone familiar with this program has told me how impactful it's been. One said, “My Vet accrued \$10,000 in rental arrears after relapsing and getting evicted from his old apartment. After he connected with our HUD VASH team and began looking for housing we had more than two dozen landlords turn him down because of the arrears. We asked community partners for help but the arrears were too great for any to cover. Because we had access to ARPA funds we were able to negotiate with the old property manager to pay down a large chunk of the arrears and have the rest waived. The Vet is now safe and warm in a new apartment.”

One of the teams working on this has spent \$70,000 in ARPA funds to help more than 215 Veterans access housing and remain safely inside. These funds helped fill crucial service gaps while also forcing our medical center to reduce silos. The homeless program now works seamlessly with Logistics, Contracting, and Finance to provide real-time essential services. This program has been a game changer. It's a big deal.

A case manager called one of my constituents at 3:30 pm on a Friday evening, saying he had a female Vet on the line fleeing a domestic violence situation. The local shelters and GPD beds were full and it was going to be a frigid weekend. We moved mountains knowing we had ARPA

funds! Within just an hour were able to pay for three nights at a hotel that would hold the Vet over until we could find her a more permanent placement the following week. Logistics, homeless services, contracting, and finance were all involved, and the result was truly inspiring.

One even said, "I bet you Rideshare and that flexible ARPA funds are why we housed 41,000 Vets last year. Good tools and how much we care, get it done."

At 7:30 am one morning, VA Police found a homeless Veteran asleep just inside of a clinic in my district. He was homeless, experiencing a mental health crisis, out of medication, desperate to leave this area, and thought he had COVID. In just a few hours we were able to refill his prescriptions, determine he was covid negative, offer a full medical evaluation, and use a Rideshare to help him secure a transitional bed in a nearby city where he felt safer. Without that transportation, he would have been forced back onto the street or into a shelter where he felt unsafe.

The VA Rideshare program has been an essential lifeline for so many, and I want to thank you for your consideration of this important request to authorize this program permanently. I strongly urge you to continue this program, which has significantly increased access to life-altering care for thousands of Veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James P. McGovern". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "James" being the most prominent.

JAMES P. MCGOVERN
MEMBER OF CONGRESS